

# connections

Massachusetts Community Networks to Eliminate Cancer Disparities through Education, Research, and Training

## What is MassCONNECT?

MassCONNECT is one of 25 community networks programs funded by the National Cancer Institute.

It is a five-year program that connects the Harvard School of Public Health, Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center, and the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute with four key community-based coalitions.

These coalitions—Boston Alliance for Community Health, Boston REACH Coalition, Mayor's Health Task Force of Lawrence, and Common Pathways in Worcester—provided the building blocks of the network and brought the mission of MassCONNECT to the community. The primary goal of MassCONNECT is to increase the capacity of the Boston, Lawrence, and Worcester communities by supporting community-based education, research, and training to lower health disparities related to cancer.



### MassCONNECT-facilitated partnerships

**Lawrence Mammography Van Days—** MassCONNECT facilitated efforts in the development of a partnership with the City of Lawrence Mayor's Health Task Force, in particular with the YWCA of Greater Lawrence, and Dana-Farber's Mammography Van. As a result, the van made a total of five visits to Lawrence from May 2007 through May 2008. Evaluation data indicates that the program has filled a need for mammogram services among underserved women in Lawrence. The van continues to visit Lawrence on an annual basis, with the most recent Van Day on August 14, 2010, as shown in the photo above.

## Why was MassCONNECT important?

MassCONNECT was a unique project that was important for many reasons:

**It was a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project.** This type of research project involves all partners and recognizes the strengths that each brings. The community helps with creating the research questions and interpreting and disseminating the results.

The goal is to combine knowledge with action and to use the results to improve health outcomes and eliminate health disparities. In MassCONNECT, the community coalitions of Boston, Lawrence, and Worcester were fully engaged in every part of the process and provided input that helped to build and strengthen the network.

**It provided support and resources to communities.** MassCONNECT provided \$22,000 each year to each of the four coalitions, to allow them to begin projects and implement initiatives. These included:

- pilot projects, such as the HPV and Communications study in Boston and the Breast and Colorectal Cancer Screening study in Worcester
- training and capacity building, via workshops on strategic communications, CBPR, and social network analysis

## MassCONNECT by the numbers

- Number of cancer and health education activities, such as health fairs and community outreach events, through December 2009: **159**
- Number of participants reached through all activities (through May 2009): **13,644**
- Number of materials developed, including website, brochures, and resource guides: **30**
- Number of copies of these materials disseminated: **17,541**
- Number of academic research publications: **23**

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- education and outreach, by increasing mammography access in Lawrence and sponsoring health fairs and events across the three other communities
- technical assistance, such as that provided to the Youth Tobacco program of the Boston Alliance for Community Health to conduct a neighborhood GIS (geographic information systems) mapping project that documented the extent of tobacco advertising in the neighborhoods of Boston

MassCONNECT helped to facilitate relationships, as with those between the YWCA of Greater Lawrence and the Dana-Farber's Mammography Van, and funding opportunities with the American Cancer Society. MassCONNECT staff also offered support by participating in community events.

**It leveraged funding.** Three important projects grew out of MassCONNECT:

- PLANET MassCONNECT, a project that seeks to bridge the gap between research discovery and program delivery through training, resource material, and a web portal that serves as a one-stop resource for planning health programs in the community. It also acts as a forum for discussion and sharing of knowledge. It was developed with the four community partners and incorporates their ideas about how the web can best be used for planning programs.



## MassCONNECT-supported research projects

**Boston Alliance for Community Health**—MassCONNECT helped the Alliance's Tobacco Disparities Initiative with a geographic information systems mapping project that focused on tobacco advertising in Boston neighborhoods. In this 2010 photo, BOLD (Breath of Life Dorchester) TEENS are testifying before the Boston Board of Health. BOLD TEENS is a youth-led organization of the Codman Square Neighborhood Council, a Boston Alliance for Community Health coalition.

- MassCONNECT 4 Kids, a CBPR project that encourages parents to make their homes smoke-free for the health of their children. It was developed with community partners and is delivered by trained community health workers.
- Project IMPACT, a study that examines how health disparities are covered in Lawrence news media and then conducts media training workshops for community-based organizations and provides toolkits to journalists.

Most importantly, the work of MassCONNECT matters because it has created sustainability in the community by establishing and strengthening partnerships. Boston, Lawrence, and Worcester continue to address cancer-related health disparities, thanks to connections made through MassCONNECT, several ongoing projects, and helpful resources.

## MassCONNECT's impacts beyond research

There have been several additional benefits to the community that were unintended:

- There has been a re-prioritization of funding and potential for policy change. For example, the Greater Worcester Community Foundation is interested in using the results of Common Pathways and MassCONNECT-related projects as they re-prioritize their local funding efforts. This data can also help drive policy change for healthier communities. Members of the Worcester City Council are looking to the local MassCONNECT partnership efforts to provide valuable data to help determine local public health policies.
- Systematic changes to address health disparities are slowly being institutionalized. The partnership between MassCONNECT, the YWCA of Greater Lawrence, and the Dana-Farber Mammography Van highlighted the need for accessible services for vulnerable populations in Lawrence. Thanks to this collaboration, a new Mammography Working Group was formed as part of the MHTF, which brings together representatives from the three imaging centers that serve the citizens of Lawrence. Together, they are working to provide much-needed services to underserved women in the area.

"For the last six years, we at Common Pathways experienced through the MassCONNECT partnership a culture and discipline of mutual respect, strong support, and appreciation of academic and community partners working together for a common goal. We learned together why and how to use data and new technologies to access and disseminate health information without decreasing or replacing the human need for interaction and relationships. We understood the value of trust, reciprocity and diversity in a partnership by learning how to communicate effectively and respectfully even when we have different opinions and specific interests."

— Clara Savage,  
Common Pathways



## MassCONNECT community coalition partners

The success of MassCONNECT is due to the hard work and commitment of its community coalition partners. They are:

**Boston Alliance for Community Health.** The Alliance is made up of 12 Boston neighborhood coalitions that are committed to community-identified health improvement planning and implementation. Alliance initiatives include both city-wide projects (e.g., youth development programs) and neighborhood-based efforts (e.g., weight management).

### Academic Leadership

#### Funded institutions:

- Harvard School of Public Health and Dana-Farber/ Harvard Cancer Center

#### Investigative team:

- Howard Koh, MD, MPH
- K. "Vish" Viswanath, PhD (Principal Investigator)
- Karen M. Emmons, PhD
- Barbara "Bobby" Gottlieb, MD
- Nancy Krieger, PhD
- Anne M. Stoddard, ScD

**Boston REACH Coalition.** The 10-year-old Boston REACH Coalition is a partnership of the Boston Public Health Commission, residents, providers, and faith-based partners. The Coalition's mission is to eliminate racial and ethnic health inequity and to promote health equity in Boston. REACH began as a community cancer-prevention coalition and has since expanded to focus energy on the social determinants of health related to health outcomes in the black community.

**City of Lawrence Mayor's Health Task Force.** The Mayor's Health Task Force is a collaborative of health care and social service providers, environmental groups, academic institutions, local businesses, and city planners. Its mission is to develop healthy public policies and activities, and to promote a better quality of life for citizens of Lawrence.

**Common Pathways.** Common Pathways is the Healthy Communities Coalition of Greater Worcester, and is comprised of nearly 175 people, including those from nonprofit groups and businesses, city and state officials, and residents. The coalition's facilities maximize resources and avoid duplication because they share the same long-term goal

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"With support from MassCONNECT and the partnership of the other coalitions, REACH has identified new ways of communicating about the root causes of health inequity and the impact of racism on health. From engaging local journalists in a media briefing to developing a new website and community toolkit, the Coalition credits MassCONNECT with being a real leader in health communication and community-based approaches to health equity."

—Erline Achille,  
Boston REACH Coalition

"Our partnership with MassCONNECT has supported and enriched the Mayor's Health Task Force (MHTF) health disparities work in so many ways! This partnership also helped further strengthen our relationships with local/area Spanish media—radio, television, and print—following our successful Media Workshop. Our relationship with the media has proven to be effective and beneficial in the promotion and coverage of countless MHTF awareness-raising and health screening events, and that of other community partners."

—Vilma Lora,  
MHTF Lawrence

"MassCONNECT's intrinsic value has literally been in the connections and relationships nurtured over the past six years. Not only have we developed a strong partnership between a community health improvement alliance (the Boston Alliance for Community Health) and academia (Harvard School of Public Health), but also the relationships with like-organizations in Worcester and Lawrence have yielded significant benefit. Through our involvement with MassCONNECT and its offspring—MassCONNECT 4 Kids and PLANET MassCONNECT—we hope to affect public health policy as well as sharpen the efficacy of our own programming."

—Ediss Gandelman, Boston Alliance for Community Health



### MassCONNECT trainings

#### Common Pathways Worcester Media Workshop—

MassCONNECT conducted media workshops in Boston, Lawrence, and Worcester to train members of community-based organizations on how best to work with local media to cover health disparities accurately and promptly. A highlight of the training included a panel where local media and community leaders discussed how best to work with one another. This February 2007 photo shows panelists at the Worcester Media Workshop.

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of improving the quality of life for people of the city and region. Common Pathways focuses on issues of economic development, education, housing, mental health and social services, public health and medical services, and transportation as community priorities.

## Highlighted MassCONNECT projects

**Social Networking Analysis.** The Social Networking Analysis study measured how the MassCONNECT network changed over the course of the project. The outcomes that were measured focused on funding, development of sustainable partnerships, exchanging resources with other partners, and participation in grants and publications. The study proved that it is worth investing time and money in building relationships. More importantly, it showed how MassCONNECT reached its goal of developing an organizational network to lower cancer risk in Boston, Lawrence, and Worcester.

**Strategic Communication Workshops.** As part of the project's training and capacity-building goals, MassCONNECT ran media workshops for members of the community coalition partners. The workshops explored how local mass media cover (or do not cover) news on cancer-related health disparities; how community groups can work with members of the media to ensure that they understand these disparities; and how local community groups can better communicate about health disparities with members of the media.



## MassCONNECT-sponsored events

**Boston REACH Coalition**—This coalition is a partnership of the Boston Public Health Commission and community residents and partners. This photo was taken at the REACH-ing for Good Health event in October 2007. This MassCONNECT-sponsored event offered participants health information and resources, as well as opportunities to get involved with REACH to address the social, economic, and environmental factors that influence community health.

## About MassCONNECT

MassCONNECT (Massachusetts Community Networks to Eliminate Cancer Disparities through Education, Research, and Training) is a program that connects the Harvard School of Public Health, the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center, and multiple community partners in three Massachusetts cities. MassCONNECT aims to lower cancer disparities through cancer education, community-based participatory research, training, and cancer control services.

One of the most important aspects of MassCONNECT is the leadership of four key partnering community-based coalitions. They are:

- Boston Alliance for Community Health
- Boston REACH Coalition
- Common Pathways (Worcester)
- Mayor's Health Task Force (Lawrence)

MassCONNECT's goals are to:

1. improve data on community-level cancer disparities,
2. provide leadership, education, and training through coalitions with respected community groups,
3. educate local media to provide more coverage of cancer disparities,
4. promote access to cancer control and treatment services,
5. provide needs assessments that will lead to a community-specific plan to address gaps,
6. evaluate outcomes related to cancer disparities in the target communities, and
7. establish and expand relationships with National Cancer Institute (NCI) Divisions and NCI-supported initiatives.

